

News

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FISH FIND SPAWNS DEBATE

PROTECTED STEELHEAD DISCOVERED LANDLOCKED IN CALAVERAS CANAL

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STOCKTON - Biologists found federally protected steelhead stranded in shallow pools on the Calaveras River, and environmentalists blamed water managers Tuesday for failing to keep the stream flowing so the migratory fish could escape to the ocean.

Stockton East Water District and the National Marine Fisheries Service are years overdue on a fish protection plan that would give Stockton East permission to continue diverting Calaveras water to farms and the city.

Without that plan, environmentalists say Stockton East is in violation of the Endangered Species Act if its operations kill fish.

From the middle of last week through Monday, 43 young steelhead were counted in the Stockton Diverting Canal - a river bypass - near Wilson Way, according to Kari Burr, a consulting biologist who was monitoring the river as part of a Stockton East plan to remove barriers that block migratory fish.

The fish were surviving in as little as 6 inches of water. Three steelhead were dead; 40 were placed in buckets and released downstream near Brookside, Burr said.

The young fish, likely born upstream below New Hogan Dam, probably got their cue to head toward the ocean after a series of January storms caused river levels to swell, experts said. But when the storms abated, water levels dropped, and late arrivals were trapped.

The event rekindled old arguments about whether Stockton East should be required to release constant flows for fish so that the Calaveras runs uninterrupted to the Delta.

"Stockton East is certainly willing to do physical things like reconstruct the dams and new fish passage around Bellota (Weir). They're just not willing to release water," said Bill Jennings, Stockton-based director of the California Sportfishing Protection Alliance. He threatened to sue.

Stockton East General Manager Kevin Kauffman said officials are trying to raise the level of New Hogan Lake, a primary source of water, which on Tuesday was 61 percent of normal. If the lake was higher, there might be extra water to send downstream for fish, he said.

Most years there's not enough, despite what critics say, he said.

"The Calaveras River can't support the type of flows they think it needs," Kauffman said.

Doug Demko, a fisheries consultant for Stockton East, said there were probably a "couple thousand" steelhead that made it out of the river before last month's high flows subsided. The Calaveras rises and falls more quickly than other streams, because it's fed mostly by rainfall. Nevertheless, it has a solid steelhead population, Demko said, with nearly 12,000 outgoing fish in 2009.

He says that's because of good spawning conditions below New Hogan Dam.

"It goes to show the most important factor ... is the physical habitat, not the flows or the size of the stream," he said.

Donnie Ratcliff, habitat restoration coordinator for U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Stockton, said the plan to remove barriers on the diverting canal was designed to complement higher flows.

"Without the flow, fixing the barriers doesn't really work," he said. Nor would the opposite - adding water without removing the barriers.

A spokesman for the National Marine Fisheries Service said a draft of the overdue fish protection plan is being finished.

Steelhead weren't the only fish left in the lurch by the sinking Calaveras River. Burr's report says hundreds of other fish, most of which are not threatened or endangered, were discovered.

As was, to the surprise of biologists, one Delta smelt, which somehow found its way to east Stockton - outside the critical habitat area that officials have designated for that threatened fish.

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